

**Opening Statement
of
Chairman Jim McDermott (WA-D)**

**Joint Hearing on Eliminating the Social Security Backlog
March 24, 2009**

Nearly 6 million severely disabled individuals depend on the Supplemental Security Income program, or SSI, to provide them with a helping hand. This program serves as a safety net by providing very modest cash assistance and medical coverage through the Medicaid program to those who have little to no income or assets.

Disability benefits, either through the Supplemental Security Income or Social Security programs, serve as a lifeline for millions of people. The cash assistance and health care coverage provided to these individuals gives them the help they need to make ends meet.

Many are not in a position to wait months to receive a decision on their eligibility for assistance, particularly those with very limited resources who are seeking assistance through the SSI program.

Yet, today the average waiting time to secure a hearing for a disability claim at the Social Security Administration is roughly 500 days or 16 and 1/2 months. This is simply unacceptable. There must be a better way to serve the American public.

To be fair, the Social Security Administration has operated at an insufficient funding level for a number of years. The Agency did not have the resources it needed to keep pace with the normal volume of applications for assistance in the Social Security and SSI programs, much less respond to rising claims that are associated with the aging of the Baby Boom Generation.

And the Agency has received new responsibilities as part of the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 and the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act of 2008. As a result, SSA has experienced severe staffing shortages, which has led to a decline in service delivery.

In response, this Committee has worked with our colleagues on the Appropriations Committee over the last two years to provide SSA with additional funding to allow them to begin to reduce the disability claims backlog. And the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided the Agency with additional funds to address the recent increase in workload and its other needs.

We will continue to work with our congressional colleagues and the Administration to ensure the Agency has the resources it needs to respond to individuals who need and deserve help.

But it is now time for the Agency to take bold steps to expeditiously reduce the length of time that a disability applicant must wait for a hearing. And it is imperative that it is done in a manner that firmly upholds program integrity so that benefits are only given to those who are eligible to receive them.

It also is critically important that, while SSA adheres to all the necessary program integrity measures, it remains mindful of the precarious circumstances facing a disabled applicant who is awaiting a decision on his or her application.

Many go hungry and/or lose their homes as they wait for a hearing and subsequent decision. Others go without desperately needed medical assistance and/or prescription drugs as they wait. And others see their health and medical conditions deteriorate.

Meanwhile, a significant number of these applicants will eventually be determined to be rightfully eligible for benefits under the Supplemental Security Income and Social Security programs.

Clearly, more needs to be done to get these benefits out to severely disabled Americans in a more efficient manner.

The 1.3 million people who are waiting for a decision to be made on their application deserve better.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses and yield back the balance of our time.